

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

BY ZACK M. GUESS

APPROACH WITH REVERENCE

There are many Scriptures that speak of the power and holiness of Almighty God, which should have the effect of causing us to prostrate our hearts before Him continually. Psalm 89:7 says, "God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him." Psalm 111:9 says that "holy and reverend is **his** name." According to Isaiah, Chapter six, the angelic seraphim who are around the throne of the LORD, cover their faces in His august presence. When Moses approached the burning bush which was indwelt by the LORD, he was told by God, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."

I am greatly afraid that we do not approach our God with the proper reverence today. We are much too casual in our approach to God. We need to learn to do as the writer said in Hebrews 12:28 when he exhorted, "let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." We need this godly fear as we approach His word. Everything in the Bible is sacred, but we come to the very essence of truth when we consider the Godhood of God! Is God truly sovereign or is He not? Can puny man frustrate the mighty God? To hear many spokesmen on the Bible today, God has a bleeding, broken heart because He cannot violate man's so-called "free will." People speak of "letting God" or "allowing God" to do certain things. In my opinion this is nothing short of blasphemy.

This irreverence toward God is also manifested in the loose way we approach the Scriptures. We need to be very, very careful how we interpret God's word. We had better be very careful that we do not read our opinions and preconceived ideas into God's word. Peter speaks of those who "are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction." The word translated "wrest" means "to twist, pervert, or torture." When we turn from the obvious meaning of Scripture because it does not suit our idea of what we think it ought to teach, we are wresting the Scripture. We need to constantly be on the guard that we do not do this because, as it says in Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" We are usually a lot more biased and prejudiced than we realize. With a great deal of humility, we need to approach the Bible with the prayer recorded in Psalm 119:18, "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."

RATIONALISM OR FAITH?

I believe that many even of God's people approach the Bible with a rationalistic approach. What do I mean by this? What I am calling rationalism here is a refusal to believe something we cannot understand or reason out. I am not saying that God is illogical. Some people try to hide behind the idea that God does not operate logically, so they can "reconcile," what to them, is the fact that both the doctrines of election and universal atonement are true. This appears to be an absurdity because it is! Either Christ intended to save only the elect or He laid down His life for the entire human race. Both cannot be true. To say that both are true would be illogical. But many people try to get around this by saying that God is not bound by the laws of logic. He acts above logic.

I deny this. God is not illogical. It is true that sometimes we cannot fathom the depths of his logical operations, but He is not illogical.

However, as just noted, while God is not illogical, His ways are so far above us as to defy perfect understanding on our parts. This is where trust or faith comes in. I often tell the people to whom I preach, when they face perplexing circumstances, that God never did tell us to **understand** Him; He told us to **trust** Him. When we take the rationalistic approach, we will not do this. If we cannot explain God's dealings in ways that we can understand, we will reject them. My dear brothers and sisters, this ought not to be! God is not irrational, but He is incomprehensible. The finite mind of man can never encompass nor fully comprehend the infinite mind of God. As the Scriptures say. in Isaiah 55:8,9," For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Why am I making all these observations? I am making them because there are too many people I know who do not seem to be able to accept the **Biblical** doctrine of God's sovereign control of all things, because they cannot understand it. Without realizing it, they are approaching the Scriptures as rationalists.

STATEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

I am now going to make a statement that I believe with all my heart because it is abundantly supported by the Scriptures. I do not fully understand this statement. I cannot fully explain it, but I get a great deal of comfort from believing it. I plan to show that I am on solid historical ground in my belief. This is what almost all Primitive Baptists used to believe. Around the turn of the century and a few decades before, there was a great controversy surrounding this doctrine. Finally there was a division in the ranks of the Primitive Baptists between what became known as the Absoluters and the Conditionalists. As so often happens in controversy, I believe that some of the brethren in each camp went to extremes and went into some degree of error as they strove to defend their side in the controversy. I believe that many of God's people began to come short of the Scriptures as they limited their belief of the extent of God's sovereignty. I do not believe that their motives were bad. I simply believe that they began to refuse to believe what they could not understand and explain. They became rationalistic in their approach to Scripture. When discussing the subject, they would use reasoning and hypothetical situations instead of confining themselves to the Scriptures. This is the approach that I used to take. I had an altogether too low view of the extent of God's sovereignty. I was so afraid of being branded an Absoluter that I came to the Scriptures with preconceived ideas. What a comfort when the Lord allowed me to just take the Scriptures for what they said and to quit trying to explain away things I could not understand.

Here is my statement: **I BELIEVE THAT GOD CONTROLS EVERYTHING TO A MINUTE DETAIL, YET HE IS NOT THE AUTHOR OF SIN.** I cannot explain this. I can explain around it a little, and I am going to try to do that right now, but I can only go as far as the Scriptures allow me to, and then I am going to have to stop. Nothing takes God by surprise. Nothing frustrates His purposes. God even uses the actions of sinful men to glorify Himself, yet He cannot be justly accused of making those men sin. He could have kept them from sinning, as He sometimes does, but in many cases He chooses not to. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 76:10, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." God lets sinful man's wrath go so far, uses it for His own purposes, and then restrains the remainder. If God so chose, he could always keep men from sinning against Him. When Sarah was in danger because of Abraham's lapse of faith, Abimelech was going to take her to be one of his wives, but God protected her. The only reason that Abimelech did not defile her, as God later said to him, was that "I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her." God could always do that if He desired to do so.

SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT

What is my Scriptural support for the above statement? The Scriptures rightly understood, I believe teach this doctrine from Genesis to Revelation. However, I will limit myself to just a few proof texts.

As you examine this list of Scriptures please pray for an open mind:

Ephesians 1:11, "In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

Psalms 115:3, "But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased."

Daniel 4:35, "And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"

Proverbs 16:4, "The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil."
[Note: This Scripture does not say that it was the Lord Who had made the wicked to be wicked. They are responsible for their own wickedness.]

Proverbs 16:33, "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD."

Romans 11:36, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

Revelation 4:11, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

This is a **very, very** incomplete list of Scriptures which, taken at face value, show that our God is definitely in control. I urge each of you to honestly look at them with as little bias as possible, and see what the Bible tells us about our Mighty Sovereign God. If there are any of you who really want to see what the Bible teaches on this subject, let me suggest a project for you. Read the entire Bible through with a pen or pencil and notebook at hand. Write down everything the Bible says that God has done. I think you will be amazed and greatly blessed.

SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE BIBLE

I want to give a text here for a reference point, and then look at some fascinating things from the word of God. Here is the text: Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."

God has a **secret will** and a **revealed will**. God is not inconsistent, but it may **appear** that He is at times. We are obligated to live according to God's **revealed will**. That simply means we are to do what God has commanded us to do and not ask Him a lot of questions. For example, when someone I love becomes ill, it is my duty to pray for him, because God has told me to. It may or may not be God's will to heal that individual, but I am to do what God told me to do. David prayed for his son until it became obvious that

it was not God's will for the son to live, because he died. After his death, David demonstrated a wonderful submission to the will of God.

JOSEPH

Let me give a few interesting examples from Scripture. It is obvious that when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery that they sinned. We cannot charge a Holy God with this sin. However God was in complete control of what happened and it was His secret will that this was the method whereby He would get Joseph into Egypt. All Bible readers are familiar with the following beautiful words that Joseph spoke to his brothers in Genesis 45:5, "Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for **God did send me before you** to preserve life." Joseph further told his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but **God meant it unto good**, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." Brothers and sisters, this is awesome! Who can fully understand this? Who can fully explain this? Why can't we just believe it and rejoice in it and glorify God for it?

SAMSON

We find some very interesting things in the book of Judges concerning our subject. There was a case when Samson definitely violated the known will of God. God had forbidden the Israelites to marry among the heathen. One of several references to this is in Deuteronomy 7:3. Samson knew this. It was plain. However, he got out of fellowship with God and wanted to marry a Philistine woman. This grieved his mother and father and rightly so. They protested against this. Samson, however persisted. Then we read very interesting words from Judges 14:4, "But his father and his mother knew not that **it was of the LORD**, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel." God did not make Samson sin. However God used Samson's sin for His own wise purposes. God was in complete control of the situation, and no one can deny that in some sense Samson's attempt to marry this woman was of the Lord, because the Scripture says that it was. Samson killed quite a few of the Philistines as a result of his trying to marry this woman, and God used this to help throw off the yoke the Philistines had over Israel. In His secret will God used, but did not cause, Samson's sin.

DAVID NUMBERS ISRAEL

To see the next example of God's amazing control, we must compare Scripture with Scripture. We must look at parallel accounts of the same event and glean from each account. We find recorded in 2 Samuel 24:1 this amazing language, "And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and **he moved David** against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah." As can be seen from the context, David sinned when he numbered Israel. He brought the judgment of God upon his nation by this act. He did wrong. Yet, the Scripture says that God moved him to do it! Does this mean that God is the author of David's sin? By this I mean, did God internally work in David's heart so as to make him sin? No, God did not! 1 Chronicles 21:1 explains how all this came about. It says, "And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel." Here is how did God it; He turned Satan loose on David. God's anger had been kindled against Israel, no doubt, because they had displeased Him by disobeying his word. Likely David, too, had displeased God in some way. God just left David to his own strength and allowed Satan to tempt him. In this sense, God had moved David to number Israel and had used Satan to accomplish His wise and just purposes. This may not be a complete explanation, but it is probably about as far as our finite minds can go.

THE BOW AT A VENTURE

The next example of God's amazing control of all events is found in 1 Kings, chapters twenty-one and twenty-two. Ahab was a very wicked king of Israel and had done many things to provoke God to holy wrath. He crowned his wicked deeds by causing the unjust death of righteous Naboth, so that the wicked monarch could have his vineyard. The Lord sent His prophet, Elijah, to pronounce judgment on Ahab. He told him that the dogs would lick his blood in the same place where they had licked Naboth's blood.

Time passed and Ahab, like many wicked men, may have thought that God had forgotten His judgment. Ahab prepared to go to battle against Syria and he asked the King of Judah, Jehoshaphat, to go to battle with him. Jehoshaphat wanted to inquire from the prophets of the Lord as to whether or not they should go to battle. Four hundred prophets told them to go on and they would have victory. Jehoshaphat was not satisfied and they called for the only one who proved to be a true prophet, Micaiah. Micaiah told them of a very strange vision that the Lord had allowed him to see. Some lying spirits had been allowed by the Lord to go and influence those false prophets so that they would lie about the situation. This does not make God a liar, nor does it make Him the author of a lie. The father of lies is the Devil, as one can learn from John 8. It does mean that God used the lying spirits and the lying prophets to get Ahab to go to battle. God had determined that Ahab would fall in battle that day.

Look at God's awesome control of events as Ahab did fall in battle. The wicked king had taken every precaution to protect himself. He had disguised himself so as not to be a prominent target. However, "a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of the harness." Now, dear friends, that man drew a bow at a venture as far as he was concerned. He did not even aim. He shot an arrow in the air. Look, however, at God's **complete and minute** control of this event. God controlled the archer's nerve impulses and muscular contractions, the angle of elevation of the bow, the direction and velocity of the wind, the direction and speed of Ahab's chariot, and a myriad of minute details! Is our God truly awesome or is He not? The arrow went into the only place where it could have penetrated Ahab's armor and struck its target. Ahab died **when, where, and how** God had determined that he would. God used lying spirits, sin, and sinful men to carry out his purposes, but He cannot be charged with their sin. Here, again, is probably about as far as our finite minds can go in considering this incident.

PHARAOH

One of the most awe inspiring passages of Scripture in the whole of the Bible is Romans 9:17,18, which says, "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." Pharaoh thought that he was sovereign, but he found out the hard way that only the Lord, the Creator of all things, is sovereign! Yes, God raised Pharaoh up. He caused him to be born at a certain time and He placed him on the throne of Egypt. Before Moses ever went to Egypt on his mission of deliverance, the Lord spoke to him of Pharaoh, and He said, "**I will harden his heart**, that he shall not let the people go." (Exodus 4:21). Jehovah said again in Exodus 7:3, "And **I will harden Pharaoh's heart**, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt." The references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart number around twenty in the book of Exodus. In the great majority, the Scripture simply says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. If we are Bible believers, we simply have to accept what Scripture says and conclude

that in some real sense God hardened Pharaoh's heart. However, this does not make God the author of Pharaoh's sin. In another real sense, Pharaoh hardened his own wicked heart. The Scripture says in Exodus 8:32 that "**Pharaoh hardened his heart** at this time also, neither would he let the people go." Here we have Pharaoh hardening his own heart, while in other places we have God hardening his heart. I believe it is talking about the same thing. God did not tempt Pharaoh to sin. James 1:13 says that "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man." God did not make Pharaoh sin. However, God so controlled events, to a minute detail, that Pharaoh reacted in a sinful manner, and God was glorified by this. This is not a complete explanation, but a complete explanation of God's wonderful ways is not possible for our puny, finite minds. God has let us know just as much as He wants us to know. This is to cause us to worship Him, not to twist His plain words or to try to explain them away.

THE CRUCIFIXION

The most important event in the history of the world was what happened at Calvary. There the Lord Jesus Christ shed His precious blood and obtained complete and eternal salvation for all His elect children. There Satan was defeated and death was abolished for the sheep of His covenant. Even in this glorious, yet heart-rending event, the All Wise God used and overruled the actions of sinful men. This is, indeed awesome and incomprehensible, but it is the plain and unmistakable teaching of Scripture. The Bible plainly says in Acts 2:23, speaking of Christ, that, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. . ." God delivered Christ, and wicked men slew Him. This was not an accident. This was according to prophecy. This was according to the Covenant of Redemption. Christ is referred to in Scripture as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." None of this took God by surprise. God was in complete control of every minute detail. None of this was accidental. Many, many prophecies were fulfilled in detail.

When the early church was filled with the Holy Spirit on one occasion they broke forth into glorious praise, and this is what they said in Acts 4:26-28, "The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do **whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.**" Little children, let us not try to explain this away. Let us rather rejoice in the wonder of grace and in the infinite wisdom and power of God, whereby our complete and glorious salvation was accomplished. Yes, God used sinful men, but He was not the author of their sin. We cannot fully explain this, but I believe the best attempt to explain this that I have ever read was done by James Orr in his article on *Foreordination* in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Speaking of God's method of control, he says, "Man acts freely, as Nature acts necessarily, but it is God who appoints the time, place, and circumstances of the free act, permits its happening, and overrules it and its issues for the furthering of His own wise and holy ends." I don't know about you, but when I consider these things, I feel like falling on my face before *Jehovah-elyon* (the Lord, Most High).

THE FULTON CONFESSION

I am saddened by the fact that many contemporary Primitive Baptists are quite ignorant of their history. They have a wonderful heritage and should become acquainted with it. In November of 1900, a large number of Primitive Baptist ministers representing probably a majority of the Primitive Baptist people in our nation met at Fulton, Kentucky. They unanimously endorsed the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689. They also added some explanatory footnotes to the original confession. I will quote just one of these footnotes to show what the majority of our ministers thought about the extent of God's control in

1900. Commenting on Chapter Five, *Of Divine Providence*, they said in their footnote, "We understand this section to teach that while God does not cause men to sin, nor is his predestination in its attitude to sin causative, yet that he exercises such a control over all his creatures as that **all chance and uncertainty is excluded from the universe.**"

I stand where these Primitive Baptists stood in 1900.

CHANCE, LUCK, FATE, FORTUNE

A quick look at any good dictionary of the English language will suffice to show that the concepts of chance, luck, fate, fortune, etc. are essentially pagan concepts. I do not say this to insult anyone or to call anyone a pagan. I just want to show some truths that mean a lot to me. Fatalism, for example, which is as far from true predestinarianism as it is possible to be, has its origins in mythology. The fates were goddesses supposed to preside over the birth and life of men. The word "fortunate" comes from the Latin, *fortuna*. Altars and temples were erected to the *fortuna*. I have tried to develop the habit of never saying that I was "lucky" or "fortunate." I try to say that "God has blessed me," or that "God has delivered me." I want to give the Sovereign God all the credit for all good, because that is where it all comes from!

LIFE AND DEATH

I draw great comfort from knowing that, as David put it in Psalm 31:15, "My times are in thy hand. . ." I try to take care of myself, because it is God's revealed will that I am to take care of the temple of the Holy Ghost which is my body. However, my times are ultimately in His hands. He sovereignly decides how long I will live. He is governing my "ups" and my "downs." My job is to submit to His will and to try to glorify Him in any and all circumstances which He, in His divine wisdom, allots to me. I am praying that I can so trust my heavenly Father and can so much want to glorify Him, that my desire will be the same one expressed by Paul in Philippians that "Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death."

This has been a very incomplete study, but any such study would have to be incomplete because the subject we are dealing with is incomprehensible. About all we can do is to fall on our faces before Him and join the heavenly multitude as they say,

Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!